Collaborative Literacy Learning in UK Workplace Learning Sites

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how adult students learn collaboratively with other peers in workplace literacy programmes. The case study involved 3 sites with 2 public sector organisations based in London. Data collection occurred over 14 months and used techniques of observation, teacher and student interviews, teacher perspective inventories and student focus groups.

This small-scale investigation has been linked with a parallel, larger Canadian study using comparable approaches and instruments in a range of sites of adult literacy learning. This paper reports the UK research and findings. It has also aimed to lay the foundations for a second stage of work, testing and elaborating conceptual models developed by the Canadian team, for use internationally and in a wider range of adult literacy sites.

The UK research has aimed to identify emergent themes and issues of collaborative learning in selected workplace literacy sites. The evidence so far has shown that:

• Relationships and work roles outside the classroom can impact on how adults learn collaboratively.
• Learners can adapt their behaviour to work collaboratively.
• Peers can play an important role in helping those who are unconfident, negative, worried or have low self-esteem.

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The paper concludes by drawing some initial conclusions for adult education and practice from the UK sites of learning studied.

**Background**

In 1998 the UK government commissioned a working group to look at adult literacy and numeracy. The resulting report, A Fresh Start suggested that up to 7 million adults in England need to improve their literacy, language and numeracy skills and proposed a national strategy to deal with the situation.

We have found that people are staggered when one confronts them with the basic facts about literacy and numeracy, and rightly so... It is a state of affairs that cannot be allowed to continue, and our Report proposes a wide-ranging approach to the challenge..."\(^4\)

The *Skills for Life* Strategy was launched by the UK government in 2001 as a direct result of this report. It aims to increase participation and achievement amongst adults. The strategy does not confine itself to traditional sectors but encompasses a wide range of settings including prisons, community learning and the workplace. An important component of the strategy is to focus on adults in the workplace and to promote this amongst employers. An Employer Toolkit has been developed to help employers to address issues, face challenges and find solutions to business problems arising from poor literacy and numeracy skills.

In England 5.2m adults have literacy levels below the levels required to achieve a GCSE grade D-G, while 6.8m adults are estimated to have difficulties in adding/subtracting using 3 digit numbers (numeration skills below Entry Level 3). A total of 15m adults have skills at the same low level and have difficulties with fractions, decimals and simple percentages.

We estimate that at least half of those with poor basic skills are in employment and yet evidence shows that basic literacy and numeracy skills are critically important to performance at work. In line with

\(^4\) Sir Claus Moser, A Fresh Start 1999
Vocational and higher level skills issues, employers have a key role to play in establishing opportunities through which employees can improve their literacy and numeracy skills.\(^5\)

The strategy focuses on 4 key areas:

- Boosting demand
- Raising standards
- Improving the quality and consistency of provision
- Increasing learner achievement

A core curriculum for literacy and numeracy has been developed and is linked to the UK’s national qualifications framework. Functional literacy and numeracy is generally agreed to be at Level 2 (approximately equivalent to IALS level 3). Tests have been introduced and these are available on-line and designed for easy access. The tests allow progress in line with the new curricula to be measured against national targets but they do not test skills in writing, speaking or listening.

Any learners with literacy and/or numeracy skills below level 2 falls within the Skills for Life remit. Learner achievement can now be measured against these standards and the UK government’s targets for achievement are 1.5 million by 2007 and 2.25 million by 2010.

In order to ensure that learning programmes are appropriate and will help learner’s progress, the Skills for Life strategy defines the various assessment processes and how they can be used.

\(^5\) [http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/workplace](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/workplace)
Screening → for possible need

Initial assessment → for levels of skill

Diagnostic assessment → for detailed learner profile to inform individual learning plan

Formative → for regular review of progress to inform learning programme

Summative → for National test or qualification completion of ILP

The following diagram shows the Learning Infrastructure supported by the Skills for Life strategy.
The strategy includes a drive to professionalise the workforce that, until now, has largely consisted of volunteers and sessionally-paid staff who may have little or no qualifications. From now on, staff will be required to undertake the new qualifications in accordance with their teaching role. The New Qualification Framework for teachers has created 3 levels of qualifications for staff working in the field.

### New Qualification Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of specialist qualification</th>
<th>Role Title</th>
<th>Definition of role – all contexts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teacher/Subject Specialist</td>
<td>Leads the learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Subject Support/Teaching Assistant</td>
<td>Supports the teaching process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Adult Learner Support</td>
<td>Supports the learner</td>
</tr>
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### Introduction

The *Skills for Life* strategy has boosted workplace provision and there are many different approaches and models. Employers may work with providers such as colleges or private training organisations to deliver training or they may provide the training themselves.

Barriers to learning in the workplace include shift patterns, facilities, stigma of attending literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) classes and admitting problems or weaknesses. Issues include the complexity of many organisations, how the programmes are promoted, whether screening is voluntary or mandatory, whether employees attend in their own time or company time, progression and support.

This study was interested in how adult students in workplace LLN provision improve their skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening through collaborative learning. Often referred to as cognitive apprenticeships, it is a way of learning with another peer (Rogoff, 1995). It is used in groups where a more
capable learner in a particular skill area helps a less capable learner by modelling, mentoring, scaffolding or coaching. This is particularly relevant in the workplace as, due to the complexity of scheduling classes around work patterns, different sites and personal lives, it is rare there are enough students to further break classes down into levels of ability.

Research was carried out at 3 sites:

**Site A**

Site A is a public sector organisation based in central London employing approximately 20,000 staff. In 2000, the organisation started to work in partnership with a local college to offer literacy and numeracy classes on-site to its employees. This collaboration became known as The Learning Zone and the 5 teaching staff are now directly employed by the organisation to improve the basic skills of its workforce. Site A is a 6 week course (2 hours per week) in report writing. Employees attend in their own time and a process of initial assessment ensures the course is appropriate to their needs.

**Site B**

Site B is a London Local Authority. This is a 6 week literacy course for street wardens. Street wardens are crime prevention officers and are supported by the police. The course is designed to help them be more effective in their role which includes completing paperwork and giving short talks to community groups. There is no selection process and the teacher estimates the range of skills within the group is between Entry Level 3 and Level 2 of the English national core curriculum – although students have not undertaken actual initial assessment tests.

**Site C**

Site C is the same organisation as Site A. The course is an ongoing 2 hour weekly class for learners with dyslexia. Each student has had a full diagnostic
assessment where dyslexia has been identified. The students range in ability and come from different parts of the organisation.

**The research question for this study was: how do adult learners collaboratively learn with other peers in workplace LLN programmes?**

**Theoretical Framework**
The theories that are best fitted, and therefore currently dominant, in the search for better understandings of work-based learning are constructivist and socio-cultural theories. These are important because they emphasise the significance of the context and environment for learning. They recognise skill and knowledge as embodied in the learning individual, and they acknowledge the significance of power relations. They consider the tacit as well as the explicit dimensions of skills and knowledge, and the ways old knowledge and new can be linked in processes of knowledge construction. These perspectives, taken together, show how people learn through purposeful interaction in social settings, and explore ways in which their knowledge and understanding can be further advanced through structured teaching and learning. The theoretical framework for this study and the linked Canadian research is drawn from the socio-cultural models which posit that learning is shaped by the context, culture and tools in the learning situation (see Taylor et al 2004). Vygotskian perspectives are based on the concept that all human activities take place in a cultural context with many levels of interactions, shared beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, structured relationships and symbol systems (Vygotsky, 1999). Many of these ideas have been integrated into situated cognition which supports the idea that learning is inherently social in nature. The nature of the interactions among learners, the tools they use within these interactions, the activity itself and the social context in which the activity takes place shapes the learning. (Lave, 1996; Kamberelis & Bovino, 1999).

**Methodology**
The methodology for this investigation was determined by the nature of the research question and the theoretical framework and used 3 sites for the case study. Data collection methods including observation, interviews with tutors and
learners, focus groups and a Teaching Perspectives Inventory. These involved a short, focussed course (site A), an ongoing, drop-in course for dyslexic employees (site C) and a short general improvement course for a team of Street Wardens (site B). Each course varied in its aims, outcomes, how learners were targeted and the teaching models used. Learners in sites A and C chose to attend the course from a menu of options whereas the learners in site B attended a bespoke course for their team.

Data collection from the 3 sites occurred over a 14 month period. Participant observations were conducted for each of the sites using an observation checklist developed in an earlier study (Taylor et al., 2003). Notes were transformed into research narratives. In addition, interviews were held with 3 tutors who also completed a Teaching Perspectives Inventory and a total of 19 learners were observed and 11 learners were interviewed individually and in groups. The focus groups took place at the start of the lesson and focussed on the question: what is collaborative learning? Lesson plans, schemes of work, teaching materials and student writing were also collected. The evidence was analysed thematically. Reference was made to the underlying broad conceptual model (see below) while remaining open to new or unanticipated issues that emerged from the data.

As a second step, the initial findings are being compared with those generated by the Canadian team with a view to expanding and elaborating the conceptual model for use cross-culturally (discussed further in Evans and Taylor 2006).
Collaborative Learning as the Catalyst in Communities of Literacy Practice

Access door for multi-leveled, or consolidated adult learners below gr. 8 in reading and writing
Interpretation of the Findings: how do adult learners collaboratively learn with other peers in workplace LLN programmes?

1. Roles and relationships outside the classroom impact on how adults learn collaboratively.

Site A  Evaluation of students leaving classes has shown that the make up of the group can be critical to some learners. They need to feel part of the group and the quality of the teaching alone will not be enough for them to stay. “We have examples of students giving up after one class but then returning 6 months to 2 years later and sustaining their attendance. Furthermore, one of our long-established, successful and high-achieving classes is at a station where all the employees are friends as well as workmates. They have good relationships inside and outside of the classroom and have worked together for many years.”  Tutor Site A

This suggests that work-based collaborative learning may be more successful in a place where established, supportive relationships already exist amongst employees.

Site B
The Site B Tutor uses positive reinforcement to create a climate conducive to learning “That’s important, well done.” Although she admits finding Gerry difficult, she treats him the same and invites him to contribute “Gerry, what have you got? Would you like to read it out?” She allows pairs or small groups to happen naturally.

Students use the class as a chance to catch up and socialise which means the tutor has to concentrate on driving the lesson forward and staying on task. Sometimes this means missing opportunities to build on learning. For example students start to debate hearing sounds and using logic in spelling but the tutor ignores this and carries on with the lesson. When the students work in small groups or pairs, much of their socialising focuses around the tasks. Their
relationships outside the classroom impact on their learning within it, as in the case of Gerry and Esther.

When asked about collaborative learning, Gerry says he doesn’t like it and prefers to work individually and needs the attention of the teacher. Gerry says he likes the job because he is out and about. He says he finds being inside difficult and particularly being part of a group and hates team meetings because of this. On week 2 of the course, he couldn’t cope and walked out. He said he felt frustrated at not being able to get his point across in the group and felt rebuked by the tutor. The tutor says she had to ask him to be quiet and allow others to answer. I suggested to Gerry that his negative experiences as a child in school may have rekindled powerful emotions when he returned to learning later in life “Definitely. I just couldn’t cope, the class had nearly finished but I just had to get out.” He sits at the end of the table, furthest away from the teacher.

He is only person in the group to not give an example of collaborative learning or say anything positive about it.

However, when paired with Esther, who is very positive about collaborative learning, he works well. He makes compromises and, with Esther’s help, manages to stay on task. Esther shows Gerry a lot of respect and is willing to allow him to dominate the relationship. She doesn’t appear to get irritated by his behaviour as the rest of the group do. She takes on the apprenticeship role even though she is probably the most capable of the pair. She appears to take feedback well and demonstrates listening skills whereas Gerry dominates. If Esther gets frustrated with Gerry, she uses humour:
“How old are you?”
“29”
“Behave like it then!”

She appears to recognise Gerry’s sensitivity about his learning and never once comments on his work unless it is encouraging or positive. Esther clearly respects Gerry and tells me in our interview “Gerry is a fantastic warden.”
It seems that Esther’s respect for Gerry outside the classroom and the fact that she is younger make her an ideal peer to help him overcome his natural barriers to learning and focus on a task. She readily shows respect:

“You do it, you’re better than me.”

When asked to read out her witness report after hearing Gerry’s, she says:

“I don’t want to follow his, his is good. Mine’s rubbish more like a story”.

The tutor admits to finding Gerry difficult. He interacts more than anyone else in the group and points out the mistakes of peers as well as his own, clearly irritating those around him.

Terry: “He just wants to tell you he spelt it right!”
Gerry “No I didn’t! I was asking about the sound.”

The tutor allows Gerry and Esther to work together even when she sets individual tasks. This decision appears to work well for Gerry and Esther. She clearly enjoys his company and is positive about learning from peers:

“Someone else brings something up that you wouldn’t have thought of and it makes you feel better because you think: I wouldn’t have known that!”

“I’ll always be able to spell ‘library’ now since Gerry told me there’s a ‘bra’ in it!”

In this case, a learner who clearly has difficulty in participating in a learning environment is helped by a respected peer.

2. Peers can play an important role in helping those who are unconfident, negative, worried or have low self-esteem.

Site C

For many people, the idea of returning to learn is not attractive because their initial experiences of education were negative, unrewarding or even damaging.
Peers can play an important role in working with learners who are negative, worried or suffer from low self esteem as in the case of Bill.

Bill is the newest member of the group. He originally came to the computer class and was referred by the tutor to the site C class because of his dyslexia. Bill is the newest and least confident member the group. His dyslexia is severe and his confidence is low – he is an apprentice. He makes the least contributions to games and discussions. When Bill spoke negatively about collaborative learning, the rest of the group tried to change his mind. David was the most vocal. Bill said that working as a group made him feel that he wasn’t as quick as everyone else.

“No, it’s different here. It’s not like school. That’s what you’re probably thinking of. I left school with nothing, I didn’t even know the alphabet and I’ve learnt everything as an adult. It was frightening at work and I bluffed for years and years.”

“It stems back from school. I hated writing when I first came but now it’s OK”

Bill makes the least contributions to class discussions and rarely answers the tutor’s questions but will always respond to a direct question. The tutor is aware of Bill’s abilities and his low confidence and includes him by prefacing some questions with his name. She encourages collaborative learning by getting the capable peers to answer Bill’s questions and then builds on their answers.

When asked how she plans and arranges pair or small group work, SCT says she sometimes sets them up with spelling games. “I try to put them at similar levels otherwise weak ones end up doing less and feeling uncomfortable. However personal characteristics are also important, for instance I wouldn’t pair Roger and Bill because Roger is very dominant and Bill would just follow him.”

During one lesson, the tutor gave the learners chopped up words in bundles and they worked together to make compound words. They had about 60 single words that would make 30 compound words. They were left with words that
didn’t fit and called them out – the pairs helped each other and re-arranged the words to make them fit. The tutor helps them, explaining why some didn’t work. She says “I feel that experimenting with different combinations takes the pressure off as they don’t have to actually spell the words themselves.”

She feels the class learn from each other and can take pressure off each other through working collaboratively. “Someone can hold back and allow someone else to take the lead. Discussions are often more creative than in a large group. It forces independence, they don’t look to the teacher all the time but feel safe and use peer support.” Site C’s tutor’s Teaching Perspectives Profile showed a high level of nurturing which is reflected in her interview and her teaching.

Site A
Pat collaborates well as she is always ready to share her viewpoint “I like that!” Although she lacks confidence in her English, she will use directing and assisting behaviours when working in small groups “What do you think?” “Yes, we should put this in place to make sure it doesn’t happen again”.

The tutor asks the group to work in pairs and organise jumbled up paragraphs into the correct order, she gives them 15 minutes to do this. Pat works with Lyn, a more capable and confident student. At the start of the task, the women move closer together and begin by reading the worksheet separately, making marks on their papers. This takes 5 minutes. The women have got the same answers and because the pair next to them (Jenny and Daryl) also finish quickly they start to share their answers. The tutor allows them to do this unsupervised. Daryl and Jenny have a different answer. Daryl asks Pat and Lyn why they have chosen that order. First, Pat laughs “Good question, how did we get that!” Lyn says “Women’s logic!” The tutor interjects “There is no right answer, you may both be right” Pat then explains “If you link the paragraphs about youths and litter is seems accusatory” She has thought about her decision and later tells me that reflecting on her answers is one of the reasons she enjoys working in small groups.
In her interview, the Site A Tutor says her main priority is to create a climate of ease and trust, “Adult learners tend to rely on others for proof-reading etc so you need to get them to do things for themselves. You need to stop the dependency so getting them to work with others pulls the support away from them. If you put another ‘weak’ person in, they have to get on with it. It makes them realise they have ideas, forces them to look at what they can or can’t do”. She believes that by creating a climate of trust and ease, adults will allow themselves to attempt to find answers, ask questions, help colleagues and therefore learn more effectively. Her aim is to encourage adults to build their self-esteem and have confidence in their own judgements. Her TPI shows a high level of nurturing which is reflected in her interview and teaching.

Pat thinks that collaborative learning is about being co-operative, working with others, and being open-minded to their suggestions. Asked why she thought the tutor encouraged it, she said “It’s the right way forward, getting other peoples’ ideas. It builds trust and teamwork and it allows the tutor to get on with other things”. Pat said she liked it because she got to know the other members of the class. She felt it built trust and she got other peoples ideas and views. She said that it helped you see there were different ways to do things and that when she said something out loud that it ‘sunk in’. She felt that if her answer was different to her partner, she could step back and have a look at it. The supportive environment of the class enabled Pat to build her confidence, reflect on her contributions and work towards becoming an independent learner.

3. Learners can adapt their behaviour to work collaboratively.

Site A Jenny is the most capable learner in the group. She is a train driver who has lost her job due to health problems and has 12 weeks to be redeployed within the company. During this time, she is applying for jobs and taking courses in IT and Report Writing. She has an obvious sense of humour which she uses to break the ice, get her point across and to hide her concerns about her work. When asked her reasons for joining the course she says “It’s a good thing to do, you can never learn too much”.

15

29.11.05
Jenny believes that you don’t necessarily have to speak when part of the whole group but in small groups or pairs, you have to contribute.

When the group breaks into pairs and are asked to brainstorm their ideas for a report. The tutor asks Manny and Jenny to work together. Jenny is lively, talkative and more confident orally than Manny although their written ability level is similar. Jenny moves to sit closer to Manny and takes the lead in the task. Manny is reticent and Jenny appears to notice this immediately and stops directing and starts to assist Manny to co-operate with the task. She leans in towards him and tries to build on his comments instead of making her own points. She appears to make a conscious attempt to work at Manny’s slower pace. Immediately they disagree but are able to discuss their points and reach a compromise.

When asked about the strengths of having students work together in pairs or in small groups, the tutor says:

“Working with others helps you see another viewpoint and stops a student being locked into their own paradigm. Can be affirming and build self-esteem. It builds confidence in their own ability to communicate”.

Site A students commented that pairs and small group work gave them a chance to think and reflect. In the large group all Jenny’s contributions were either amusing comments or inviting or directing behaviours. When working collaboratively with Manny, a serious and contemplative student, she slowed down and was more focused on the task.

The tutor also says:

“Students do not always think at the pace of a large group, small groups give them more time to grasp points themselves without holding up lots of other people. It is important to remember that largely, these are people who have failed in traditional forms of education. Collaborative learning allows them to work and learn at their own speed but not in an isolated way.”
This is an obvious strength of collaborative learning but less obvious, is that students such as Jenny who may think quickly but use humour to mask weakness in a large group, can become more focused if paired with a peer who has a different learning style. During a whole group activity on punctuation, Jenny leans back on her chair and points to an apostrophe and asks me what it is in a very low voice. I reassure her this is often quite a tricky punctuation mark for adults and tell her to ask the tutor to explain how to use it. I wonder if Jenny’s position in the group as most capable learner and class clown, inhibits her showing weakness in a whole class situation. She is the only member of the group who doesn’t seek information openly from the tutor. All her contributions are either amusing comments or inviting or directing behaviours.

Site C

Paul works in a pair with Carol, who is a new student. Paul has attended the class for a long time and is familiar with the tutor and the environment. In his desire to put Carol at her ease, he talks more, interacts more and takes on the role of capable peer even though Carol’s skills match his. When doing a creative writing exercise about picture postcards, he uses inviting behaviour “Shall we pick one we like first?”

Paul is reliable at work, is good verbally and ‘holds the station together’ bringing a wealth of experience to the job. In 3 years his confidence and reading fluency have improved, although he never reads outside the class and never reads any reading material he is given at work. “I get about a carrier bag a month and put it in the bin, I used to get my wife to read bits but now I realise I can do without it! I just keep my ears open!”

When working with Carol, Paul draws on his confidence of the familiar environment to support Carol in the task even though he doesn’t find the task any easier than she does.
Tutor Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Site C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dyslexia specialist. Qualified with LLU+ to diagnose and teach dyslexic adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40–45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Qualified to teach literacy and ESOL (City and Guilds). All experience with adults including TEFL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Qualified Primary School Teacher. Retrained to teach adults in 1998 – City and Guilds 9285 Teaching Literacy to Adults</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Decision Making Practices

All the tutors observed worked in similar surroundings - learners sat around a large, conference-style table with the teacher combining working with them as one group, dividing them into small groups or pairs, or working individually. At site C, the tutor tries to pair learners according to their level as the class is learner-led. In the curriculum-led Report Writing course, the tutor allows pairings to happen naturally but intervenes if she thinks the pair isn’t working. At site B, the tutor also allows pairings to happen naturally, finding that colleagues who work together outside the classroom have clear preferences for who they work with inside the classroom. Learners in this class often work in pairs even when they haven’t been specifically asked to do so.

"Every workplace that the practitioner enters is different. Each has its own culture influencing the nature and dynamics of the program; each has its own vocabulary or jargon that the practitioner must learn and use correctly; each has its own set of economic imperatives influencing the need for a sustainable program; each has its own code of labour practice affecting why, how and when the program will be offered." Knowledge Acquisition in the Field of Practice, Nancy Steel
In all the classrooms observed there was an atmosphere of trust and ease with tutors building on learners’ responses and contributions. Site Tutor A often thanks learners for their contributions before building on what they’ve said. This type of supportive learning is a key element of Social Decision Making Practices. Learners are free to make decisions based upon their own perceptions of the abilities of peers, and decisions around who in the group has common learning goals and common cultural and life experiences. This was particularly true of the learners at site B. However, in the site A and C classes where learners didn’t know each other outside the classroom, decision making practices varied from week to week depending on the group composition but helped bind individuals together in their learning experience.

In common with the Canadian findings, learners adjusted their initial perceptions of the tutor’s role and worked independently to find answers, used peers (and in one case, one pairs of peers used another pair) as the tutor created an environment for this to happen.

The four components that emerged as the key collaborative practices among literacy learners in the Canadian study were in evidence in this study. Social learning behaviours of inviting, assisting, directing, tutoring and modelling were all observed in the UK study.

“What do you think? Yes, we should put this in place to make sure it doesn’t happen again”.

Daryl asks Pat and Lyn why they have chosen that order. First, Pat laughs “Good question, how did we get that!” Lyn says “Women’s logic!” The tutor interjects “There is no right answer, you may both be right.” Pat then explains “if you link the paragraphs about youths and litter is seems accusatory.” She has thought about her decision and later tells me that reflecting on her answers is one of the reasons she enjoys working in small groups.

As with the Canadian study, ‘table checking’ was common: “We spell for each other and Kate puts us right.”
Also, in common with the Canadian findings, there was also negotiation and compromising between learners with efforts going in to building relationships and recognising social etiquette. There was evidence of patience and empathy towards less able peers.

“I’ll read mine although I think theirs are more logical”.

“Some of the captions are difficult to read because they’re written in capitals”
“Yes, I find that.”

“Your turn”

“We all teach each other.”

Also, directionality patterns, the fourth component in the peer collaboration process, were similar. Learners were aware of their own abilities and where they fitted in with the rest of the group.

“I couldn’t have done is without the discussion first!”

“If I’m not too sure, someone can kick start me. If I don’t see it straight away, it helps”.

The Tutor’s Philosophy and Leadership Style

The tutors knew the varying levels of ability and skilfully used this knowledge to facilitate learning to promote a collaborative approach.

“I try to put them at similar levels otherwise weak ones end up doing less and feeling uncomfortable. However personal characteristics are also important, for instance I wouldn’t pair Roger and Bill because Roger is very dominant and Bill would just follow him.”
Tutor C says she judges by what the learners produce and tries to promote independent learning beyond the classroom:

“For instance, David is more capable so I give him homework to bring back next week, I encouraged him to borrow a book from the class library – I am trying to get him to do work at home and be an independent learner. He reads a tabloid newspaper everyday, I’ll bring him in an article from a broadsheet and encourage him to see the difference. I am encouraging him to do the pre GCSE course in September (next course up).”

The tutors at sites A and C had a common style and approach, using methods and approaches that encouraged collaboration among all levels of learners. Both created an environment conducive to collaborative learning and believed it was essential for learner success. Tutor B feels that pair and small group working takes the pressure off learners as they can allow a peer to take the lead.

“Discussions are often more creative than in a large group. It forces independence, they don’t look to the teacher all the time but feel safe and use peer support.”

As with the Canadian findings, the tutor’s role had a direct influence on the collaborative practices among peers. All the tutors shared a dominant nurturing profile on their Teaching Perspective Inventories and a belief in building trust and confidence amongst learners to create a climate conducive to learning.

“I think that the tutor should be clear about the purpose of both the lesson and the tasks. I try to build up positive experiences in reading, writing and oral skills and create a safe environment to ask questions. I take them through an ordered structured path.” Site Tutor A

“I might set up pairs and use only one dictionary to force them to work together or one handout between 2 otherwise some will still work alone. Sometimes I
give them specific roles within a pair or small group eg reading, listening or writing. Site Tutor C

Functioning as a Team
In line with the Canadian study, as the group works together over a period of time, learners begin to gel and, led by the tutor, begin to operate as a team. They get to know each other’s strengths and weakness, for instance allowing quieter member to talk and broadly, this serves to create a positive learning environment.

However, in contrast to the Canadian findings, in two of the classes, dominant learners were slightly disruptive and had a destabilising influence. Both tutors admitted to difficulty in maintaining an open, collaborative teaching style but at the same time controlling a slightly wayward and dominant group member. In the case of Site B:

“If they get on, good. Their ideas are beneficial and they can develop a trust between them. However, sometimes they don’t pay attention and get on with the task. Their social and work life spills over into the classroom and they use the class as a time to catch up. It’s very hard to get them to settle and focus.”

At Site B, Roger dominates the exercise on laying out a formal letter. The interactions are:

Tutor: 23
Roger: 22
David: 12
Bill: 6

Bill is the newest and least confident member and his interactions reflect this. Roger is a capable peer who is enthusiastic about collaborative learning but the tutor feels he is both difficult to teach – he often rejects the structure of the task and ‘does his own thing’ - and his behaviour makes it difficult to manage the group.
Instead of modelling behaviour and picking up on teaching strategies in order to help less able peers, Roger jumps in quickly with answers and pushes the group to go at a faster pace. In common with Gerry, from site B, both learners lack of confidence in their own abilities make them disruptive rather than helpful and supportive to those around them. It is only when learners feel confident they will take on the role of capable peer, for Gerry and Roger, their educational background has scarred them and they exhibit the same disruptive behaviour they probably learnt as children. Roger grew up feeling inadequate because of his dyslexia

“I left school with nothing, I didn’t even know the alphabet and I’ve learnt everything as an adult. It was frightening at work and I bluffed for years and years.”

Gerry was expelled many times due to his behaviour problems – he is capable but self-taught.

**Movement from Guided Learning to Independent Learning**

In a collaborative learning environment, both the roles of the tutor and learner gradually change as the learner moves from guided learning to greater independence. However, for some learners working in a collaborative environment, their progress towards independent learning is dependent upon other group members. In the first Site C class, Paul’s learning is guided by the tutor but when he works with Carol in a later class, he takes the lead – inviting Carol to participate in the class and displaying the confidence of an independent learner. Paul has moved towards independent learning but it is the absence of the group’s capable peers and presence of a new learner that give him the opportunity to really demonstrate this.

Paul is clearly more confident when David and Roger aren’t in the class. When he works in a pair with Carol, he talks more, interacts more and takes on the role of capable peer even though Carol’s skills match his. When doing a
creative writing exercise about picture postcards, he uses inviting behaviour
“Shall we pick one we like first?”

Paul thinks that collaborative learning is bouncing ideas off each other. He says it makes him feel confident as everyone in the class finds the activities challenging. Outside the classroom, Paul's dyslexia makes him feel slow and inadequate. He says the more his confidence grows in the classroom, the more he feels he can contribute. This is supported by the teacher and by my observations.

In the case of Paul and Carol from Site C and Gerry and Esther from Site B, it is the less capable peer that leads the learning. The women, Carol and Esther allow the men to take to the lead. Carol is a new student and respects the fact that Paul is older, has been attending the classes longer and has been in the job for longer. Perhaps these factors lead to her allowing Paul to lead the learning. Similarly, Esther's respect for Gerry outside the classroom spills over and she allows him to lead the learning even when she is in fact the more capable peer. These cases highlight the fact that the model supported in the Canadian findings is more problematic and issues such as job role, seniority and gender appear to influence peer learning. In the more traditional model found in the Canadian sites, the capable peers support the least capable. However, in both these cases, the women were able to boost the confidence of the men by taking the role of least capable peer thereby helping the men progress towards independent learning.

**Informal Learning of other New Literacy Practices**

Informal learning of other new literacy practices did not emerge strongly from the observations and related interviews but interviews with adult literacy learners within the same company have shown that this dimension is worth further investigation. For example, one learner talks about the effect of literacy on her life outside work. Firstly, how her reading practices have changed:
A: I’m more in to reading. I want to (I want to you know and I’ve found reading enjoying, to be able to read, and I have the aid of finding words, if I don’t know the meaning I’ll go and look for it, so it has improved a lot.

Interviewer: So what sorts of things do you like reading now, that you didn’t read before?

A: I read newspapers, and I pay particularly attention to the construction of the sentences and that sort of thing. Read (inspiration ..so that’s (now I read newspapers.

Interviewer: Have you changed your mind about anything, since, as a result of going on the course?

A: Changed my mind is wanting to do more. You know wanting to do more.

Secondly, how the confidence built in the classroom has impacted on her voluntary work as a befriender:

Interviewer: So these learning experiences that you’ve been through has it had any effect on that aspect of your life (counselling/befriending) or was that something you’ve always done and you’ve always felt the same way about?

A: Oh this time I have confidence.

Interviewer: The confidence comes through in that as well?

A: Yes. You know I wish I could describe it stronger than what I’m saying, it’s like you’ve been caged and set free. That’s how I feel, so I think…

Interviewer: Belief in what you can do?

A: Yes. If I can do it everybody has (you know, self confidence and I’m grateful for it.

Finally, the same learner is asked to think about how she learns as an adult. Her answer suggests that a different style of teaching has enabled her to learn more independently as an adult.
Interviewer  Have you developed, thinking about you as a learner, have you developed learning skills that you didn't have at school?

A  Yes.

Interviewer  And how would you describe those?

A  It's new improved, way of learning, back home then, well maybe, yes new improved especially for adult education or here, I don't know about the children but you are led, through the topic, they involve you or you are directed to group form, what is needed, you know research or library whatever...being led on to look for what you need.

Interviewer  So you're more independent as a learner.

A  Mm.

**Implications for practice**

*Relationships outside the classroom impact on how adults learn collaboratively.*

The UK study shows that learners and tutors value the role of collaborative learning. However, when teaching in the workplace, tutors need to be sensitive to the roles that learners have outside the classroom and appreciate the impact this has inside the classroom. For example, at Site B, the supervisor tells Janet that he got 36 spellings correct in the test when in fact he scored 30. It is difficult when a person has a supervisory or managerial role outside the classroom to have their level of literacy exposed in front of their team and this may be compounded by asking learners to work collaboratively. However, this would be an area for further research. All the learners at site B appeared to be defined by their work role, the class talk revolved around their work outside and, as they were in working hours, the classroom seemed to be an extension of the workplace even though it was off site.

Contrastingly, at sites A and C, classes were held on-site but made up of learners from all areas of the business. This seemed to enable people to be less affected by their work role. Although on work premises, their peers were
largely unknown to them so their behaviour was more akin to that of a regular literacy class. This has implications for workplace organisers.

**Learners can adapt their behaviour to work collaboratively.**

Learners can adapt their behaviour to work collaboratively as in the case of Jenny at site A. She adopts the position of class clown in a large group but when she works as part of a pair, she works seriously and makes an effort to focus on the task. Each group contained an extrovert personality that the tutors found hard to control when working as a large group. They made significant improvements when working as part of a pair and this has implications for teachers.

**Peers can play an important role in helping those who are unconfident, negative, worried or have low self-esteem.**

As well as adopting a nurturing style to their teaching, collaborative learning can support learners who are unconfident, negative, worried or have low self-esteem. In the UK, half of those with poor basic skills are in employment\(^6\) and many would not access traditional provision. Offering opportunities for workplace learning at times and locations to suit employees can be a major motivational factor for people to take the first step to improve their skills. For success in retention and achievement, it is important this step is a positive one. This study suggests that workplace colleagues can play a critical role in supporting the teacher to create a climate conducive to learning.

Furthermore, employees with dyslexia may be particularly vulnerable especially if their dyslexia is not disclosed at work. Their coping skills may break down as the workplace shifts and changes leading to stress and anxiety. Providing opportunities for them to come together as in Site C, means they can use the support of peers in their journey towards independent learning and adopt better strategies to cope with their dyslexia outside the classroom. This has implications for employers.

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\(^6\) [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Workplace](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/Workplace)
Implications for the further development of theory

Like the Canadian study, this small-scale research provides further evidence of ways in which collaborative learning strategies can help to overcome some of the barriers that adult learners in this field face. Reder (1994) has suggested that collaborative activities are seen to be “critical contexts” for literacy development in which “individuals share their literacy-related knowledge and skills, just as they share other kinds of knowledge and skills, often on a reciprocal basis” (p. 43). The study provides further support for Reder’s practice engagement theory that individuals acquire literacy through participation in various literacy practices and they participate in these practices in different ways. Incorporating peer learning, in which learners learn with and from each other, within a broadly collaborative teaching approach creates an environment in which literacy learners experience a change in how they view themselves. Initially, when these learners enter literacy programs, they tend to view themselves learners who have failed or under achieved in formal education. Our findings have confirmed that collaborative learning practices can help change this viewpoint.

“No, it’s different here. It’s not like school. That’s what you’re probably thinking of. I left school with nothing, I didn’t even know the alphabet and I’ve learnt everything as an adult. It was frightening at work and I bluffed for years and years.”

“It stems back from school. I hated writing when I first came but now it’s OK”
“Working with others helps you see another viewpoint and stops a student being locked into their own paradigm. It can be affirming and build self-esteem. It builds confidence in their own ability to communicate”. Site C Tutor.

We also find, with the Canadian team (Taylor et al 2005) that the sense of being able to influence the learning process by their own inputs and actions (‘agency’) that collaborative learning promotes positive experience that further facilitates their learning. Collaborative learning and sensitive, nurturing teaching styles appear to build the confidence and the self-esteem needed to enable successful adult learning.

The Site C Tutor, says her main priority is to create a climate of ease and trust, “Adult learners tend to rely on others for proof-reading etc so you need to get them to do things for themselves. You need to stop the dependency so getting them to work with others pulls the support away from them. If you put another ‘weak’ person in, they have to get on with it. It makes them realise they have ideas, forces them to look at what they can or can’t do”. In this way she slowly tries to guide learners towards independent learning.

However, when asked about the limitations of having students work together in pairs or in small groups, she says: ”Time and focus, people can take much longer than you have planned and they can go off the point. Also, if pairing doesn’t work, it can be destructive in work-based projects, people with insecurities but good jobs can feel exposed”. This supports the finding in the UK
study that roles and relationships outside the classroom can impact what happens within it.

Collaborative learning can influence the work-based curriculum. The Site C Tutor noticed problems with planning common to all students. In a literacy group, she did a piece of work “Problems with Neighbours” and got students to compare their individual brainstorming. Some used long sentences, some short words, some mind maps. She felt this opened up planning styles. She found that her input helped guide them and thought this would be good to develop into a course. When her manager asked her to run a ‘business related’ course, together they came up with report writing as a necessary writing skill for the workplace and felt that it could incorporate the good practice of general writing skills. Learners at Site C are encouraged to progress vertically and horizontally. Some move across subjects and between short courses and each year a small cohort join the GCSE classes in English and Maths (approximately IAL 4).

To date, numerous studies have used socio-cultural frameworks to explore literacy development outside of programs but few have used these frameworks to analyse what happens inside an adult literacy program. These findings support the usefulness of a socio-cultural approach to understand the social nature of literacy learning within adult literacy programmes. The next stage is to develop an extended dialogue between the ideas and evidence emerging from the Canadian and UK sites to further test and elaborate the underlying conceptual model.
References


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